



CHAPTER NINE

Hester and the Physician

After having met Reverend Dimmesdale on the platform, Hester was shocked by his deteriorated physical and mental condition. In seven years he had undergone a frightening change for the worse. A secret enemy was continually at his side, disguised as a friend and helper. She decided that it was her responsibility to help him.

During the past seven years, Hester's position in the community had changed. She silently accepted her isolation and her shame. She was a self-ordained Sister of Mercy! ¹ She

1. **self-ordained Sister of Mercy** : person who helps the sick and the poor of her own free will.

The Scarlet Letter

constantly helped the poor, the sick and the afflicted. Many people refused to interpret the scarlet A with its original meaning. They said it meant Able. It took a longer time for the rulers of the community to acknowledge ¹ Hester's good qualities.

The townspeople had forgiven her for her frailty. They had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as a token of her many good deeds.

The symbol had had a powerful and peculiar effect on Hester. Her physical attractiveness had undergone a sad transformation. Her warm and graceful character had become cold and barren. ²

In her life of solitude and hopelessness, Hester was free to think about her world and to criticize it. Outwardly, she conformed to the rules of her community, but in the privacy of her mind, she disapproved and detested them. She felt that the whole system of society should be torn down and built up again. If her thoughts had been made public, she would have suffered death for attempting to destroy the Puritan institutions.

Hester decided to meet her former husband, Roger Chillingworth, and do what she could to rescue his victim. One afternoon, while walking with Pearl, she saw the old physician who was gathering roots and herbs. Hester asked Pearl to go to the seashore and play with the shells, while she spoke to the physician.



1. **acknowledge** [æknoʊlɪdʒ] : recognize and admit.
2. **barren** : desolate, empty.

Hester and the Physician

Hester approached him and said, "I need to speak to you." The physician looked at Hester and said, "Mistress Hester has a word for old Roger Chillingworth!"

Hester looked at Chillingworth and was shocked to see how he had changed in the past years. It was not so much that he had grown older, but that he looked so evil and fierce. There was a glare of red light that came out of his eyes, as if the old man's soul was on fire. In a word, he was the striking example of a man who had transformed himself into a devil. He had devoted seven years of his life to the constant analysis of a tortured heart. And he had derived immense enjoyment in adding fuel to those fiery tortures and gloating¹ over them.

"When we last spoke together seven years ago, you made me promise never to reveal your true identity. At that time, I had no choice. Since that day, you have been behind his every footstep, day and night. You search his thoughts. You dig into his heart. You cause him to die daily a living death. And he still doesn't know who you really are!"

"What evil have I done to this man?" asked Chillingworth. "I have cared for his failing health in every possible way. If I had not cared for him, he would have died!"

"It would have been better if he had died at once!" said Hester.

"Yes, you are right!" cried old Chillingworth. "Never has a man suffered as he has suffered—and before my very eyes! He has felt a constant evil influence, like a curse. But he does not

1. gloating : looking at or thinking about something with enjoyment.

know that I am responsible for his misery. I am the evil fiend!"¹

"Have you not tortured him enough?" asked Hester. "Has he not paid his debt to you?"

"No, no! He has only increased the debt. Do you remember me, Hester, as I was when you first met me? I was peaceful, innocent, kind and just. Was I not all this?"

"All this and more," said Hester.

"And what am I now?" he cried. "I am a fiend! Who made me so?"

"I, myself!" cried Hester, shuddering.² "It was I, not less than he. Why have you not avenged yourself on me?"

"I have left you to the scarlet letter," replied Chillingworth.

"It has avenged you," said Hester. "But now, I must reveal the secret. It is a debt I have with him. Forgive him, and leave his punishment to the Almighty Power. You have been deeply wronged, and it is your privilege to forgive. Do you want to reject this priceless privilege?" There was almost a majestic quality in her despair.

"It is not in my power to pardon. You planted the germ of evil, and now let the black flower blossom. It is our fate. Go and do as you want with that man." He waved his hand and continued gathering herbs.

With great anger, Hester watched him walk away. "Be it sin or not," she said bitterly, "I hate the man!" She wondered how she could have married him. When her heart knew no better, he had

1. **fiend** : devil, evil spirit.

2. **shuddering** : trembling or shaking suddenly, from fear or cold.

The Scarlet Letter

persuaded her to be happy by his side. "Yes, I hate him! He betrayed me!"

When Chillingworth had gone, she called back her child. Pearl had been playing with seaweed and had made the letter A, which she put on her bosom. "I wonder if mother will ask me what it means!" thought Pearl.

"My little Pearl," said Hester, "the green letter on your young bosom has no purpose. Do you know why your mother wears it?"

"I do!" answered Pearl. "It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart."

"And what is that reason?"


"I have told all I know," Pearl said seriously. She took her mother's hand in both her own, and gazed into her eyes with earnestness. ¹ Hester thought that perhaps Pearl had reached an age when she could become a friend for her—a friend with whom to share her sorrow.

Pearl continued to ask her mother about the meaning of the scarlet letter. One day Hester said, "Silly Pearl, there are many things in this world that a child must not ask about. Hold your tongue! Otherwise, I will shut you in a dark closet!"



CHAPTER TEN

The Pastor and his Parishioner

 **H**ester was determined to reveal to Reverend Dimmesdale the true identity of Roger Chillingworth. She knew that the reverend often took walks in the forest and along the seashore.

Therefore, one day Hester took little Pearl for a walk in the forest. Pearl ran about happily trying to catch the sunshine, and then sat down with her mother on a heap ¹ of moss. ²

“Mother, is there a Black Man who lives in the forest, and carries a big book where people write their names with their own

1. **heap** : small pile.

2. **moss** : soft green plant.

The Pastor and his Parishioner

blood? Did you **ever** meet him? Oh, tell me!"

Hester looked curiously at little Pearl and replied, "Once in my life I met the Black Man. This scarlet letter is his mark!"

After a vivid conversation with Pearl, Hester heard footsteps in the forest. She knew it was the reverend.

"Pearl, go and play near the brook,¹ while I speak to this person who is walking through the woods. Do not go far away! Stay near the brook."

When the child had gone to play, Hester walked towards the minister, who was coming down the path. He looked tired and weak, and his step was listless.² He would have been only too happy to lie down in the dark forest and die.

"Arthur Dimmesdale," Hester said softly.

"Who is there?" said the minister. He took another step and discovered the scarlet letter.

"Hester! Hester Prynne!" he said. "Is it you?"

"Yes!" she replied. They were both awestricken.³ Arthur Dimmesdale touched Hester's cold hand with his own. They sat down on the heap of moss, and when they had found the strength to speak, made remarks about the approaching storm. They had been separated for so long by fate and circumstances that it took some time before they could open their hearts to each other.

After a while, the minister looked at Hester and said, "Hester, have you found peace?"

She smiled sadly, looked at her bosom and asked, "Have you?"

1. **brook** : small stream.

2. **listless** : without energy.

3. **awestricken** : amazed, speechless.



The Scarlet Letter

"None—nothing but despair! Were I an atheist,¹ a man without a conscience, I might have found peace long ago. But I am a minister! I am so miserable."

"The people revere you and you have certainly worked well among them," said Hester.

"More misery, Hester! I have laughed bitterly at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it! Happy are you, Hester! You wear the scarlet letter openly on your bosom. Mine burns in secret! If only I had a friend, or an enemy, to whom I could tell the truth!"

"You have a friend in me," Hester said. Then, trying desperately to conquer her fears, she said, "You *have* such an enemy, and he lives with you under the same roof!"

The minister jumped to his feet, gasping for breath and clutching² at his heart. "What are you saying? An enemy! Under my own roof? What do you mean?"

With her silence of seven years, she had ruined the man she still so passionately loved! Now, she would gladly have died at Arthur Dimmesdale's feet.

"Oh, Arthur," she cried, "forgive me! I have always been truthful, but in this circumstance I had no choice. The old physician—Roger Chillingworth—he was my husband!"

The minister looked at her with unimaginable violence of passion. He had never had a blacker or fiercer frown.³ He sank down on the ground and buried his face in his hands.

1. **atheist** [eɪθiist] : person who doesn't believe in God.

2. **clutching** : holding tightly.

3. **frown** [fraʊn] : facial expression showing anger.

"I might have known it! I *did* know it! My heart knew the secret all along. Why didn't I understand? What horror! Woman, you are responsible for this! I cannot forgive you!"

"You will forgive me!" cried Hester, throwing herself beside him. "Let God punish! You will forgive!"

With desperate tenderness, she threw her arms around him and pressed his head against her bosom. His cheek rested on the scarlet letter.

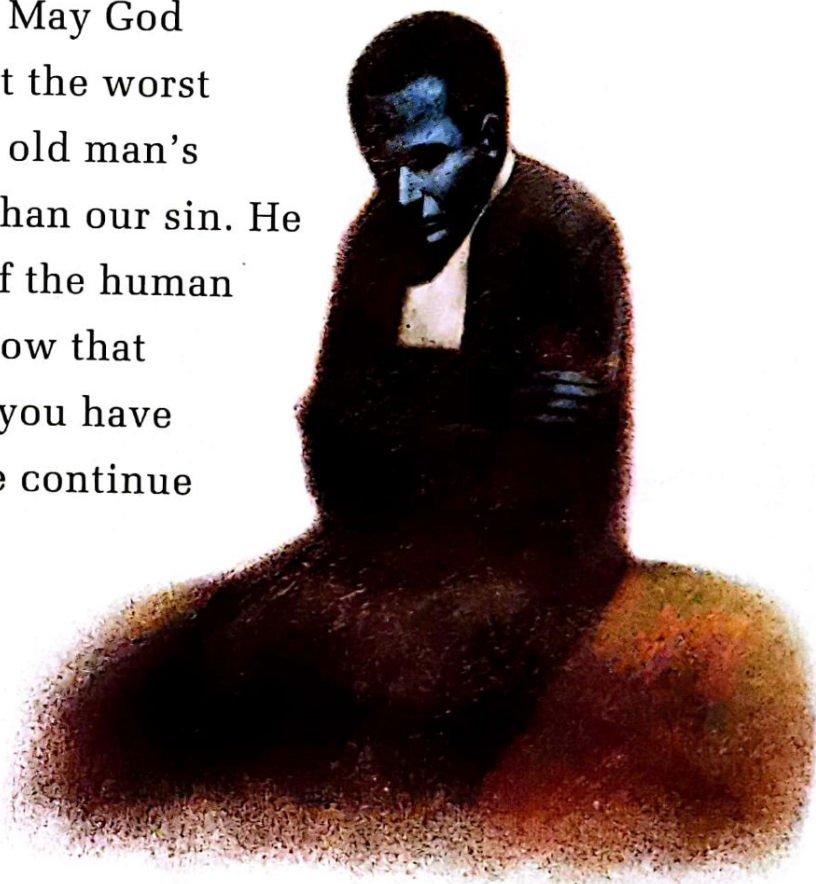
"Will you forgive me?" she repeated over and over again.

After a long silence, he replied, "I forgive you, Hester. I forgive you! May God forgive us both! We are not the worst sinners in the world. That old man's revenge has been blacker than our sin. He has violated the sanctity of the human heart. We never did. But now that Chillingworth knows that you have revealed his secret, will he continue to keep *our* secret?"

"There is a strange secrecy in his nature. I do not think he will reveal our secret," answered Hester.

"And I! How can I live any longer, under the same roof with this deadly enemy?" exclaimed the reverend. "Think for me, Hester! You are strong. Resolve this for me!"

"You must no longer live with this man," said Hester firmly.



The Pastor and his Parishioner

"But how can I avoid it? Tell me what I must do. You are strong, Hester," said the reverend.

"Is the world so narrow?" exclaimed Hester, fixing her eyes on the minister's, and exercising a magnetic power over his shattered¹ spirit. "Where does this forest path lead? It goes deeper and deeper into the wilderness, where no white man has been. There you are free!

"Then, there is the broad path of the sea! It brought you here, and it can take you back again. You would be out of his power and completely free, if you returned to our native land or to Germany, France or Italy."

"It cannot be! I cannot leave my post. I have no strength or courage to begin a new life," answered the reverend.

"You are crushed under the weight of seven years of misery," replied Hester. "But you will leave it all behind you! Begin everything anew! The future is still full of trial² and success. There is happiness to be enjoyed. Exchange this false life of yours for a new one. Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, but do not lie down and die."

"Oh, Hester," cried Dimmesdale, "I must die here! I have no strength or courage left in me to venture into the wide, difficult world *alone*."

He repeated the last word. "*Alone*, Hester."

"You will not go *alone*," she answered, whispering.

Then, all was spoken!

1. shattered : broken, destroyed.

2. trial : attempt, effort.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Flood of Sunshine

Arthur Dimmesdale gazed into Hester's face with a look of hope and joy, mixed with fear. Hester was strong and determined. The scarlet letter had isolated her; it had made her an outsider. In a sense, it had freed her. As an outsider, she was free to see and judge the Puritan institutions and laws with a critical eye. Her mind was free to think, to wander, to dream. She had become very independent.

The minister, on the other hand, had lived and worked within the strict laws of the Puritan community. Only once had he transgressed—but it had been a sin of passion, not of principle or purpose.

Finally, he was able to see a ray of hope in his future. He had decided to flee, but not alone. He understood that he could no longer live without Hester's companionship, strength and

The Scarlet Letter

tenderness. Once the decision had been made, he began to feel a strange enjoyment, a sense of exhilaration and relief.

"You will go!" said Hester firmly. "Let us not look back. The past is gone. See! I am removing this symbol forever!"

Hester removed the scarlet letter and threw it away among the leaves.

The stigma was gone. Hester had not known its weight until she felt the freedom! Then she took off her cap and let her beautiful hair fall upon her shoulders. A tender smile appeared on her lips. Her sex, her youth and her beauty all came back from the past. And all at once, the sunshine burst forth into the dark forest.

"And now, you must know Pearl!" she said joyfully. "Our little Pearl."

"Do you think she will be glad to know me?" he asked.

"She will love you dearly, and you will love her. I will call her! Pearl! Pearl!"

Pearl walked towards them. At a certain point, she stopped at the brook.

"Come little Pearl! Cross the brook!" said Hester gently.

Pearl did not want to go to her mother. She looked at Hester, and seemed to be searching for the scarlet letter on her bosom. She pointed her little finger at her mother's breast—the scarlet letter was missing! She shrieked wildly, gesticulated violently and threw her small figure into extravagant contortions. Her anger seemed uncontrollable.

"I know what bothers her," whispered Hester to the clergyman. "Pearl misses something that I always wear. I must bear its torture a little longer until we have left this region. Then

The Scarlet Letter

I will throw it into the ocean!"

With these words, she picked up the scarlet letter and fastened it to her bosom. She then gathered up her hair and put on her cap.

"Do you know your mother now?" Hester asked.

"Yes, now I will come," answered Pearl, jumping across the brook.

"Come, the minister wants to welcome you," said Hester. "He loves you, and he loves your mother too."

"Does he love us?" asked Pearl. "Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together?"

"Not now, dear child, but in a few days he will walk hand in hand with us. We will have a home and fireside of our own. You shall sit on his knee and he will teach you many things," Hester said.

The reverend, wanting to enter into the child's heart, bent forward and kissed her on the brow. Pearl immediately broke away and went to the brook, where she washed off the reverend's kiss.

As the minister departed, he turned around to look at the mother and child to assure himself that he had not had a vision. He saw Hester in her grey dress and near her, little Pearl.

They had decided to flee to the Old World with its crowds and cities. There they would find a shelter and a civilisation that were congenial to the clergyman's culture.

It so happened that there was a ship in Boston harbour, that was sailing for Bristol ¹ in four days. They booked the passage for

1. **Bristol** : English seaport.

two adults and a child. In three days, the minister had to deliver the important Election Sermon. He would not have left without doing his public duty.

After having met Hester in the forest, he felt a surge¹ of physical energy. He was amazed at the change that had taken place in his body and in his spirit. He felt strong, energetic and strangely mischievous. He felt transformed. At every step, he was tempted to do something wild or wicked. He had a strange desire to be scornful and bitter, to ridicule all that was good and holy. He felt spiteful² and unkind.

"What is it that haunts and tempts me in this way?" he said to himself. "Am I mad, or did I make a contract with the fiend of the forest and sign it with my blood?"

As he walked through the town, he met Mistress Hibbins who said, "So, Reverend sir, you have been to the forest. The next time, tell me and I will accompany you."

"The only reason I went to the forest was to greet my pious Indian friend, Apostle Eliot,"³ answered the reverend.

"Ha, ha, ha," cackled⁴ the old witch-lady, and went away smiling.



1. **surge** : sudden strong feeling.

2. **spiteful** : desire to annoy a person in a small way.

3. **Apostle** [əposl] **Eliot** : a converted Indian who appears in Boston history books.

4. **cackled** : gave a short, high laugh.

The Scarlet Letter

The reverend hurried home and began working on the Election Sermon, which was extremely important to him.

There was a knock at the door. It was Roger Chillingworth.

"Welcome home, Reverend sir," he said. "How is Apostle Eliot? Oh, but you are pale. My medicine will help you feel better for the Election Sermon."

"No, no! I do not think so. My walk in the forest and the clean air have done me good. I will not be needing your medicine any more, my friend."

All this time, Chillingworth was looking at the minister with the caring look of a physician. But in spite of this outward show, the reverend was almost convinced that the old man knew about his meeting with Hester.

The physician knew from the minister's look that he was no longer considered a friend, but a bitter enemy. Both of them carefully avoided the subject.

When the reverend was finally alone, a servant of the house brought him dinner, which he ate with a good appetite. Then he threw the original Election Sermon in the fire and began writing another one.

On the day on which the new governor of Boston was to take office, Hester and Pearl came to the marketplace. It was an important holiday because it marked the beginning of the new political year of the colony.

The marketplace was crowded with the inhabitants of Boston, dressed in their black and grey clothes. There were also brightly dressed Indians, settlers from the wilderness and rough-looking sailors from the ship that was in the harbour. The Puritans were

A Flood of Sunshine

a bit less stern and gloomy¹ on this holiday. Hester finally felt free, happy and hopeful. She knew that soon she would be starting a new life without the scarlet letter. Her heart was light.

In the distance, Hester could see Chillingworth talking to the commander of the ship. After a while, the commander stopped to speak to Hester.

"Well, Mistress Prynne, I have another passenger on board my ship! This time we will have two doctors on board—the ship's surgeon and this other doctor."

"What do you mean," asked Hester, who was startled.² "Is there another passenger?"

"Why, you must know! This physician, this Chillingworth, says he is a member of your party, and a close friend of the gentleman you spoke of."

"They know each other well, indeed," replied Hester, trying to be calm.

At that instant, she saw old Chillingworth himself, standing at the corner of the marketplace, smiling at her wickedly.

Before Hester could collect her thoughts, the sound of military music was approaching. The procession of magistrates and citizens was on its way to the meetinghouse, where Reverend Dimmesdale would deliver the Election Sermon.

The music became louder and Pearl clapped her hands. Following the magistrates, came the young and eminently divine reverend, who would preach the sermon. This was the first time that Reverend Dimmesdale had shown such energy during a

1. gloomy : dark, pessimistic, cheerless, sad.

2. startled : very surprised, astonished, shocked.

The Scarlet Letter

procession. His body was not bent and his hand did not rest on his heart. But it was a spiritual strength, not a physical one.

Hester gazed at the clergyman, and felt that he was another person, so different from the reverend she had met in the forest. She hardly knew him! He moved proudly on, surrounded by the rich music and the procession of the venerable leaders.

Hester decided to listen to the sermon from her position beside the scaffold since the meetinghouse was very crowded. The reverend's voice was like a musical instrument. It was filled with emotion, passion and anguish. It was majestic, but there was an element of sadness in it.

As Hester listened to the sounds that came from the meetinghouse, Pearl ran about the marketplace, looking at the townspeople, the Indians and the sailors.

One of the sailors said to her, "Your mother is that woman with the scarlet letter. Tell her that I send this message: I spoke again to the old doctor, and he will arrange to bring his friend, the man she knows, aboard with him. So your mother need not worry, except for herself and you. Go and tell your mother!"

Pearl nodded and ran off to tell her mother, who was devastated by this message. Was there no way out of this labyrinth of misery and persecution?

